

[Bertha Mandell Candler]

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Bertha Mandell Candler (Husband: Jeff Candler)

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When I called on Mrs. Bertha Mandell Candler, principal of the La Mesa grade school, she was taking her vacation at home with Jeff Candler and the three little Candlers.

"I love to be at home with Jeff and the kiddies," she said. "It beats going to California, the mountains or anywhere else."

"How long have you lived in New Mexico?" I inquired.

"Why all my life," she said, "I was born in old Mesilla. My parents came from Santa Ana, California in a covered wagon in 1874. My grandfather was Thomas Casad, the man responsible for the first mowing machine in the valley. In 1876 he built the first flouring mill at Mesilla. The building is still standing, though no longer used for milling purposes, it was operated by water. My grandfather was the first farmer to attempt to grow fruit on a commercial scale in the valley. He set out about forty acres in apples, pears, peaches and grapes. About the time the trees began to bear the coddling worm arrived and destroyed the whole orchard.

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"Grandfather also introduced the first pure bred Angora goats and the first registered Poland-China hogs into this region.

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He drove the goats from El Mora, New Mexico and hauled the hogs in wagons. He was so successful as a live stock man that he followed that business the rest of his life. He raised the Mexicans' wages from twenty-five to fifty cents, and in 1874 he planted the first field of alfalfa in the valley.

"The first school I attended was at Mesilla Park, Myrtle Bailey, a cousin to May Bailey, or Mrs. Royal Jackman, was my teacher. I finished my education at State College and then taught school, a profession I have continued to follow for almost twenty years. My first venture in teaching was at La Union in 1911. With the exception of one or two, my pupils were all Spanish American children. I had over seventy pupils in half of my schoolroom and sister Jessie had as many more in the other half. I taught the primer, first and second grades while she taught the third and fourth grades. We had practically no equipment with which to work, and the common drinking pail, containing a tin dipper stood on a box in the corner. My wages were fifty dollars per month out of which I paid for board and room. We stayed at the home of Mrs. Alvarez. Cruz, Estella and Eduino Alvarez were my pupils.

"I have always liked the Spanish American children and their parents. They were always very nice to me and easy to get along with. Mrs. Alvarez and Mrs. Valdez, were always doing something for us. Robert Valdez was also one of my pupils. And my pupils always felt grieved if 'teacher' as they called me, didn't share their candy. Every morning my desk was fairly loaded with donations 3 of all sorts. They were generous to a fault, but I loved every one of them and never gave up a school without shedding bushels of tears. I seldom found a Spanish child lacking in artistic ability. Every one of them could sing, dance, recite or draw, and they were invariably good in penmanship. On San Jose day they would take the little Santo, or statue of their patron saint and visit every house where they had a son by the name of Jose. We always went along and were offered refreshments of wine and

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other good things to eat and drink. They celebrate here in La Mesa too, but they only parade around the church. The La Mesa mission, which bears the name of San Jose was built in 1853, a year before the Gasden Purchase was signed. The walls are eight feet thick at the base, and it is pretty well peppered with bullet holes, for in the early years it was used as a fort. This house we live in was also built in 1853. Whenever you see adobe walls as thick as ours and the ceilings made with la tillas and vigas, you will always know that they are very old.

"In the old days there were no bridges across the Rio Grande so we paid the Mexicans to ferry us across in their skiffs, which they kept ready for that purpose. If, however, we were going to a party or a dance somewhere, we would ford it with a horse and buggy. One evening a young man offered to take us girls to a dance over at Anthony. We made it across without any trouble, arrived at the dance in good order, and had a good time. Following the dance we discovered that the river had come up. None of us wanted to remain in Anthony all night so we decided to risk the Rio Grande. Now I wonder how we happened to escape with our lives, for the old buggy was cradling up from one side to the other and it was all we could do to hold on and keep from slipping into the water. The poor old horse finally struggled through it however, and landed us safely on the western bank.

I taught at La Union for a year and then went to Las Cruces to teach at the Central school where I remained from 1912 to 1916. In the latter part of 1916 I was married, but not to the boy I loved. We had a quarrel and Jeff went away. I thought he wasn't coming back so I accepted the other fellow. But I wasn't happy and I don't think he was. Finally we were divorced and I was free again. Then my childhood sweetheart returned and we were married. I have been very happy with Jeff Candler and we have three healthy children. His father was a cattleman and Jeff was brought up on a cattle ranche. At the present time he's working on the Corralitas ranche sixteen miles west of Las Cruces. The Corralitas has three hundred and thirteen sections. Harvey Bissell, Jeff's boss, just paid twenty-eight

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thousand for some new stock. Jeff's people are from Georgia and related to Asa Candler the Coco Cola man.

"After I was married I continued to teach because I enjoy it. But following my second marriage I rested for two 5 years. From 1919 to 1924 I taught at Mesilla Park. Then I returned to Las Cruces where I taught from 1924 to 1927. In 1928-29-30, I taught at Fair Acres, a suburb of Las Cruces. Then I came to La Mesa where I am the principal.

"This spring the teachers called at the homes of the school children to get acquainted and to cement a better understanding between the parents and teachers. The American mothers were very gracious, but the Spanish American mothers were delighted, extended us a hearty welcome and if they happened to be cooking, gave up a pressing invitation to dine with them. Their homes were remarkably clean and quite comfortable. We found two families in need of assistance but they were from Oklahoma.

"The Mexican people take an optimistic view of life. A little thing like a national debt or how the future generation is going to pay it wouldn't bother them like it does the average American. They are great for credit; they like the system of paying a little bit at a time on their bills. Sometimes a newcomer in business will have a fit because some native runs a bill on him and fails to pay up in a hurry. They soon learn, however, that the Mexican is a born installment man, that he doesn't mind paying a little each week or month, but to pay it all at once in a lump sum to any merchant seems like highway robbery. I have always noticed that they have a way of stating their troubles in a matter-of-fact way, with no self pity. They are always ready to help, sympathize and grieve over others, but as far as their own personal affairs are concerned, well, today may be sad but there is always a brighter to-morrow-- a manana or poco tiempo!

"Many things happen in a schoolroom to break the monotony. One day I asked the children how many of them owned a toothbrush? So many hands were held up that I was amazed.

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"Well, Roberto," I said to a large boy in the front row, 'why don't you hold up your hand?'

"I no got wan brush," he replied.

"The next day I noticed that Roberto was elated over something so I said:

"Well, Roberto did you get a brush?"

"The teeth he exposed for my inspection were gleaming white, and I was proud to think that I had something to do with the transformation. His next words, however, brought me down from the clouds where I'd been floating, with a jolt.

"I no buy the brush', he explained, 'eet belong to my beeg brother."

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Bertha Mandell Candler was born in Old Mesilla, New Mexico; December 16, 1890; mother was Sara Van Winkle Casad, daughter of Thomas Casad, pioneer farmer of the Mesilla Valley, who brought his family overland in a covered wagon from Santa Ana, California and located in Old Mesilla in 1874; they were not attacked by Indians but saw numerous fresh graves of people whom they had murdered; Bertha Mandell Candler has taught school in Dona Ana County for the part twenty years; one of her former pupils is Robert Valdez, a member of the Governor's staff at Santa Fe; she was educated in the public schools of Dona Ana County and finished her education at State College; Bertha Mandell Candler is principal of La Mesa School; she is the wife of Jeff Candler and the mother of three healthy children.